

## INTRODUCTION

The principal purpose of *Iowa Trails 2000* is to provide guidance to state agencies and local communities in their trails planning efforts. This document sets forth design guidelines, implementation strategies, and a statewide trails vision that should lead to a comprehensive statewide trails system in Iowa.

This vision corresponds directly to “Iowa 2010,” a document designed to chart the future course of Iowa. Goal 4 of the report (found at [www.iowa2010.state.ia.us](http://www.iowa2010.state.ia.us)) recognizes Iowa as a principal recreation destination, and makes recommendations for solidifying and improving that role. Specifically, Action Step 1 calls for the state to “develop and promote new and existing recreational opportunities,” including expanding and connecting Iowa’s trail system.

The implementation of the statewide vision, therefore, is supported by state government, but will need to be accomplished through the combined efforts of numerous agencies, organizations, and trails groups. These trail developers should plan systems of trails that fit their needs and goals, and prioritize trail projects within those systems. *Iowa Trails 2000* provides guidance on beginning this task, and sets forth recommendations for achieving the statewide trails vision.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are designed to help accomplish the statewide trails vision for Iowa.

### — ***INCREASE FUNDING FOR TRAIL PROJECTS***

The primary issue that stymies increased trail development is funding. The Iowa DOT and DNR is currently able to fund, at best, 25 percent of trail applications to the funding programs they manage. In keeping with Iowa's goal to become the premier trails state, additional funding should be secured for trail projects, and additional funding sources and innovative financing mechanisms should be explored.

There are several ways in which additional funding may be secured:

- ◆ State agencies, principally the DOT and DNR, should advocate increased funding support for trail programs, including the State Recreational Trails Program. The most effective means of proving the need for such an increase is to demonstrate the shortfall in funding of trail projects each year. As described above, a significant amount of trail projects each year go unfunded. It can, therefore, be demonstrated to the Iowa Legislature that there is a statewide need that is not being met, and that additional funding is needed.
- ◆ State agencies and local governments should work together to find ways that garner additional trails funding for development, promotion, and maintenance, such as new grant programs or loans. At Trails Advisory Group meetings described below, trail

developers, funders, and advocates could set forth a strategy for increasing funding for trails projects in Iowa, and for using available funding more efficiently. This unified approach would demonstrate support for trails at all levels.

- ◆ The Trails Advisory Group should consider the possibility of accessing funds from private sources, such as foundations, national non-profits, and corporations. In some states, snowmobile manufacturers provide significant funds for the construction and maintenance of snowmobile trails. The same might be asked of bicycle, in-line skate, or OHV manufacturers. In addition, greenway corridors may offer the opportunity to partner financially with foundations and non-profit organizations such as The Nature Conservancy, the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation, or the Trust for Public Land. Additional private funding sources should be considered by the Trails Advisory Group.

### — ***ESTABLISH A TRAILS ADVISORY GROUP***

A small group representing trail owners, funders, and user groups should be convened regularly to consider current development practices and strive to improve their effectiveness. The group's meetings, which should take place at least annually, would be strategic in nature – “working meetings” – including discussion on the status of trails in Iowa and planning for future trail development. The meetings would be convened by the DOT or DNR, and could be moderated by an independent party, either a professional consultant or, perhaps, a non-profit organization or agency representative from another state.



The Trails Advisory Group would be similar to the *Iowa Trails 2000* Technical Advisory Committee, and may include representatives from the following groups:

- ◆ Iowa DOT
- ◆ Iowa DNR
- ◆ Other state agencies that may offer technical support, such as the Department of Economic Development or the Department of Cultural Affairs
- ◆ State Legislators
- ◆ The Governor's Office
- ◆ The Federal Highway Administration
- ◆ Counties, MPOs, and RPAs
- ◆ Local governments
- ◆ Trail user groups
- ◆ Non-profit organizations involved in trails planning or implementation, such as the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation or the Iowa Trails Council.

The Trail Advisory Group should focus on the following issues:

- ◆ Tracking of trail projects throughout the state, with the goal of keeping a statewide system map up-to-date.
- ◆ Analysis and streamlining of the various funding processes. The Federal Highway Administration recently performed a peer evaluation of the TEA-21 funding process in Iowa and several other states. The findings of this study should be considered.

- ◆ A review of trail funding programs and/or funding prioritization criteria. As discussed in Chapter 6: Implementing the Vision, trails will be developed both by state agencies and by local governments with funding assistance from the state. Funding programs should be periodically reviewed to ensure they are still focused on meeting state goals and implementation desires.
- ◆ Evaluation of the status of trails implementation in Iowa. This evaluation should include a determination of whether the current rate of trail implementation is adequate. Between 1990 and 2000, the average rate of trail implementation was approximately 78 miles per year. In order to achieve the statewide trails vision in a timely manner, this rate should be increased. The Trails Advisory Group should discuss how to accomplish this task.
- ◆ Evaluation of trail promotion and maintenance. These evaluations would assess completed trails, and offer additional guidance on effectively maintaining and marketing them.
- ◆ Coordination and partnerships between agencies, local communities, and trail groups. A statewide vision requires involvement from numerous implementers. Partnerships are particularly important in the case of rail-trails, where the DOT, the DNR and a government agency may all work together to secure, plan, and develop such a corridor. At Trails Advisory Group meetings, partnerships should be stressed and enhanced, with statewide trails implementation as the ultimate goal.

The strength of the Trails Advisory Group would lie in its ability to forge partnerships and bring all the different levels or jurisdictions of government together for one cause. By bringing representatives of a variety of trails developers, funders, and advocates to the same table, Iowa's statewide trails vision can be more effectively implemented as a common vision.



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## ***— INCREASE RATE OF TRAILS DEVELOPMENT***

At the current rate of trail development in Iowa, the statewide trails vision set forth in *Iowa Trails 2000* would take approximately 56 years to complete. Iowa is currently building approximately 78 miles of trails per year, generally accomplished by local communities with funding assistance from state sources. This rate should be at least doubled.

Trails are in high demand. Throughout the public involvement process for *Iowa Trails 2000* there has been extensive support for more trails in the state. Whether through specific trail corridor suggestions or general sentiment, the people of Iowa have placed a high priority on trails implementation. The statewide trails vision should be a high priority task for the state as a whole.

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## ***— MORE PROACTIVE ROLE BY STATE AGENCIES***

Previous to *Iowa Trails 2000*, the DOT has principally acted as a trail funder, and has not been an active developer of trails in the state. The DOT and other state agencies should increase their direct involvement in trails projects, in part to resolve the dilemma of lack of funding in some regions of the state. Legislative changes may be needed to increase state agency involvement in trails development.

An increase in direct state involvement in trails development could be done in several ways:

- ◆ The DOT could take a more active role in the preservation of abandoned railroad corridors in cases where local groups are promoting trails. The DOT is well-positioned to secure such corridors, because the right of first refusal falls to the state. By

preserving abandoned railroad corridors, either through trail construction or rail- or utility-banking, the DOT can effectively set aside extensive, high-quality corridors for future trail construction. In such cases, the DOT may later partner with a local government to actually develop the trail, but the first, crucial step of corridor preservation should be more actively pursued by the DOT.

- ◆ The DOT and DNR should be prepared to assist local governments in implementing difficult projects by coordinating between agencies and/or assisting with the project. This practice establishes ongoing partnerships between state and local agencies that go beyond funding applications.
- ◆ The DOT and DNR should complete appropriate system plans that further delineate trail corridors for which each agency will be responsible. These trail system plans, based on the statewide trails vision outlined in Chapter 3 will lay the framework for actual trails implementation. These plans are discussed further below.

### — ***SUBSEQUENT TRAILS SYSTEM PLANS***

*Iowa Trails 2000* provides a broad vision for trails in Iowa, and is designed to assist state agencies and local governments in planning and developing trails. This document does not set forth specific corridors for development, nor does it prioritize trail projects. The statewide trails vision is a starting point for further trails planning, particularly those system plans that outline priorities and programs.

As discussed in Chapter 6: Implementing the Vision, trails in Iowa will be developed either by local governments, often with funding assistance from the state or federal government; or by state agencies themselves based on approved plans. System plans, both on a



statewide and a local level, are the backbone for the implementation of the statewide trails vision. Corridors shown on statewide plans, such as the DOT's bicycle/pedestrian plan or the DNR's OHV policy plan, could be implemented directly by the state or jointly between the state and regional and local governments. Corridors shown on local, regional, or county plans should be selected and implemented by local agencies through funding applications to the state.

Examples of system plans that could be developed include:

- ◆ A Statewide Bicycle and Pedestrian System Plan, completed and implemented by the DOT.
- ◆ A statewide OHV policy plan, completed and implemented by the DNR.
- ◆ A statewide canoe/kayak route designation program, administered by the DNR.
- ◆ A statewide equestrian system plan, completed and implemented by the DNR and the Iowa Equestrian Trails Council.
- ◆ An interconnected system of regional snowmobile trail system plans, completed by local snowmobile clubs and coordinated by the DNR.
- ◆ A statewide mountain bike policy plan, completed and implemented by the DNR.
- ◆ Multi-modal regional trail system plans completed and implemented by MPOs, RPAs, county conservation boards, local governments, and local trails groups.



Subsequent trails system plans should be completed by any agency that intends to develop trails. System plans should include at least the following information:

- ◆ A detailed inventory of the system area, whether it be regional, statewide, or local. This inventory should include natural areas, populated areas, points of interest, existing recreational facilities, and other important attractions.
- ◆ A trail system map, which shows connections throughout the system area and specific trail projects to be implemented.
- ◆ A discussion of trail use modes. The system plan should delineate which modes will be allowed or accommodated on the trail corridors shown. Some system plans will be mode specific (such as the DOT's bicycle/pedestrian plan), and others will accommodate a variety of modes within a certain geographical area (a county conservation board's county trails plan).
- ◆ An overall cost estimate of the proposed system. Useful costing information by trail type is included in Chapter 5: Cost Analysis, but consideration should be given to potential bridges, property acquisition, and other issues unique to a particular plan.
- ◆ An implementation strategy for constructing the trails shown on the system plan, including a targeted timeline, prioritization methods, agency involvement, and funding strategies.

Completion of trails system plans would essentially create a statewide network for each trail mode. Every user type would, eventually, be guaranteed a far-ranging, interconnected trail system. These statewide modal networks would be complimented by local systems designed to provide connections to the statewide networks and offer opportunities for shorter trail experiences, both for recreation and transportation.



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## ***BICYCLE AND PEDESTRIAN ACCOMMODATION***

The DOT has recently adopted a bicycle and pedestrian accommodation guidance for state roads and highways. This guidance (as described in Appendix C) will provide for the inclusion of bicycle and pedestrian facilities on certain elements of the state highway system.

Local jurisdictions, namely counties and cities, should consider developing similar policies for their roadways. By accommodating bicycles and pedestrians within road rights-of-way, the breadth of the statewide trails vision can be increased. In addition, trails projects in road rights-of-way may benefit from funding types that may not be used for other trails (see Chapter 6: Implementing the Vision).

### **NEXT STEPS**

*Iowa Trails 2000* is designed to guide state agencies and local trail implementers to successful accomplishment of the statewide trails vision. Iowa's statewide trails vision will provide an interconnected statewide trails network for each use mode, as well as crucial connections between and within communities and parks.

Since 1990, when the Iowa Statewide Recreational Trails Plan was written, more than 1,000 miles of trails have been implemented as a part of the system set forth in that plan. The extent of the statewide trails vision set forth in *Iowa Trails 2000* will be limited only by the trail planning efforts of state agencies and local trail implementers. To continue with the implementation of the statewide trails vision, the following items should be accomplished:

- ◆ The establishment of a Trails Advisory Group to guide trail implementation throughout the state.
- ◆ The completion of statewide trails plans, namely the bicycle and pedestrian plan being prepared by the DOT.
- ◆ The development of strategies for securing additional funding.

Iowa has had great success with trail implementation in the past. Iowans have demonstrated their desire, love, and need for trails through public comment and frequent trail use. *Iowa Trails 2000* is the next step in achieving the statewide trails vision that was begun by the creation of the first Statewide Recreational Trails Plan and has continued through the efforts of local communities, state agencies, non-profit groups, regional governments, and trail user groups over the past 10 years.

At a time when trails are in high demand and funding falls short of desires, planning and cooperation are key. By performing subsequent trails system planning, each implementing group can reassess its progress and priorities in order to most effectively use available funding. By coming together as a Trails Advisory Group, trails advocates can effectively work together on the implementation of the statewide trails vision.

